

Talking to your kids about tragedy

Swipe through for tips on how to talk to your kids
and support them through unspeakable tragedy



Feel all your feelings

You are also probably wrestling with why this happened, as well, and your search for answers is part of your grief.

Whatever you are feeling, it's OK. Your feelings are not right or wrong—they simply are. Accepting your emotions and finding constructive ways to express them, bit by bit, day by day, are how you can best work through your grief.

Create space for your feelings before you open the door for questions

Explaining mass tragedy to children

"There are people in this world who might make a decision to hurt someone else on purpose. It can be difficult to understand why someone would want to cause others harm like this. I wonder how you're feeling or what questions you have."

It's okay for you to not have the right response or all the answers. It is okay to say 'I don't know'. It may be impossible to answer all of your children's questions.

That's okay - children do not need their parents to have all of the answers. What they need the most is to feel heard, safe, and supported. What you're doing is opening doors, if your child doesn't want to walk through it right now that's okay. They just need to know you're willing to go there with them.

Be Honest

Adults often believe that the truth should be hidden in order to protect their children; yet, children can sense when a change has occurred. Using facts when explaining death will help your child as they grow and develop a deeper cognitive understanding of death.

Concealing information can produce anxiety in children. Being honest is helpful because it allows children to put an accurate name to the change rather than have it be an unspoken and scary unknown.

As Rabbi Earl Grollman states, "no one should be kept in emotional and intellectual isolation."

Give Reassurance about safety

Explain all that adults do to keep children safe, such as locking doors or conducting emergency drills.

Review safety procedures at school and at home. Let children know who to call, where to meet, and how to communicate to help them feel secure and know adults are in control.

Younger kids may not be as worried, but teens are likely to know more and have concerns. Address them directly rather than avoid it.

Information should be age appropriate

Developmental age affects a child's understanding of death and dying. Children have different needs depending on their age. For example, preschool age children need to learn what happens to a body when it dies and that death is permanent. Older elementary age children may be realizing that death can happen to anyone, including themselves.

Give young children brief, simple information and have more detailed conversations with middle and high school age youth

Model healthy behavior

You have feelings, your kids have their feelings, so creating a space where you can model that for your kids will allow them to express theirs as well.

It can be constructive for parents to acknowledge that watching or hearing about violent incidents makes them also feel anxious or fearful

Information May Need to be Repeated

Depending on the child, information about death will be processed differently. A child may need to ask the same question many times. This can be frustrating and painful for the adult, but it is crucial for the child's understanding of death.

It is okay to say that you need time. Provide a concrete time, not too far in the future, when you will answer the question. You could say, "I am feeling overwhelmed right now, but I will answer your question in five minutes."

Keep Conversations Open

Although death is all around children – in nature, on television, in stories – understanding what death means is an on-going and evolving experience. Children may have questions about death and dying. Create a safe place for children to ask questions by directly stating that they are allowed to ask anything, and leave the door open to more questions in the future by saying that they can come to you anytime.

MOURNING

*"We do not "get over" our grief.
Instead, we learn to integrate it into who we are."*

Over time and with the support of others, your grief can be integrated into your life. The key to getting through this terrible time is expressing your inner grief outside of yourself. This is called mourning. Ways to mourn include talking about your thoughts and feelings with others, crying, journaling, writing condolence cards to the families directly affected, participating in an online support group, praying or other spiritual practices, making art, helping others in your community, and anything that helps you feel like you are sharing or demonstrating your thoughts and feelings in some way. Active, ongoing mourning gives your grief movement and is the process through which you will eventually reconcile your grief.